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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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THE WESTERN CANADIAN IDENTITY

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There is, and has been from some point in the late nineteenth century, a western Canadian regional consciousness. It has been expressed by residents of the western interior and observed by visitors and now has at least the ring of familiarity if not of truth. Students of the West, however, and of other areas in Canada, have never defined the region in specific terms. When the subject was first addressed at these meetings, in 1937, a scholar pointed to geography and ethnic composition as foundations of the region and concluded about the western interior: "The prairie sets its mark on all who come to it. It is not easy to analyse its effects but no one has lived there and remained the same as he was before he came. . . ."[1] In the intervening decades, knowledge of the West has increased by a remarkable degree but study of the region as a whole has not kept pace. "Region" itself, as a concept, has come into question in some disciplines. Still, we do divide our mental maps of Canada into regions, and we do emphasize the importance of such areas in the national experience. For these reasons alone, regional identity is a valid topic for inquiry.

There are two common approaches to historical discussions of the western "region." One employs single-factor definitions and is consistent within the terms of a discipline or concept. The relative unity or distinctiveness of the physiography, economy, political behaviour, administrative structure, frontier, relationship to dominant metropolitan centres, literature, and culture, each has defined a West. Individually, none provides a criterion by which an objective region can be distinguished unless one accepts some type of determinism. Moreover, no single community emerges from these criteria; the hinterlands of Montreal and Toronto, for example, are larger than the physiographic region known as the central plains, and the influence of the frontier is clearly not unique to one area. Taken together, however, the definitions reinforce the impression of a distinctive "western" experience and suggest a separate entity within the Canadian state.

The second common approach analyzes particular movements, issues or institutions for evidence of a "regional viewpoint." Thus, the western secession from the Trades and Labour Congress or the western criticism of the tariff or the western role in the creation of the United Church is said to demonstrate "regionalism." The term implies that farm, labour and religious leaders shared assumptions or worked

toward a similar goal. Yet it is clear that J.W. Dafoe and T.A. Crerar, conservative progressives, were distant from Bob Russell and Bill Pritchard, labour militants, and that the addition of Salem Bland and C.W. Gordon to such a quartet would produce no greater harmony. What do these men and movements share? Can they be integrated with the single-factor definitions of region to describe a consistent community?

In the case of western Canada, regional consciousness — its development and its impact upon society — is an appropriate concept for studying the nature and role of the regional community within the nation. In the decades after 1870, newcomers to the territory west of the Great Lakes articulated their problems and aspirations, and undertook to influence the course of events in accordance with these expressions. In other words, they developed a western myth and identified western interests and then set out to impress the pattern of this regional consciousness upon the country. Region, in this view, is a state of mind which changes as men's attitudes and relationships change. As E.P. Thompson said of class, region ceases to be an objective thing or place and becomes instead an historical phenomenon which happens in human relationships.

Popular assumptions and attitudes emerge in a mysterious fashion. Although suffering from overuse, myth seems the best term to describe this essentially irrational area where beliefs arise and consensus is established in a society.[2] The story of Patrick Gammie Laurie will illustrate some of these forces in western Canada. A true pioneer, Laurie carried a printing press on a cart from Winnipeg to Battleford in 1878. On the masthead of his journal, the *Saskatchewan Herald*, he placed the single word, "Progress." A year after his arrival, on a cold October Sunday, he observed a group of men swimming across the Battle River near Battleford to attend church. Describing the scene Laurie said: "The spirit that impelled them to do this will carry them over many difficulties, and marks them as pioneers of the right stamp, who must succeed because they know no such word as fail."[3]

As the years passed, it became apparent that Battleford lay far from the area of rapid development. When the Canadian Pacific Railway was directed south of the Saskatchewan valley, the territorial capital was removed to ugly Regina. In the Riel uprising, Laurie's eldest son lost "all he had" in the burning of Fort Carlton, his youngest son lost his outfit and mill in the massacre at Frog Lake, where his partner and all his men were killed, and the editor's immediate family lost its clothing, furniture, bedding and books.[4] Laurie began the ninth volume of the paper in 1887 with an apology for its continued

small size and explained that shortage of funds limited his ambitions. And still his faith in the Northwest seemed unshaken. Two months after the battle at Batoche he reported that "the soldiers have conquered a peace," and insisted prosperity would soon return.[5] Those who criticized the expense of western development belonged "to the dark ages," he wrote, because they did not see how the North-West was fast overtaking the rest of Canada in "wealth and resources and all that contributes to the glory of the Dominion."[6]

Laurie was representative of a western perspective in the first two generations of settlement. The myth which he imbibed and created was closely related to contemporary attitudes in the United States and Great Britain and was obviously the offspring of western European civilization. Its primary component was an emphasis upon the new society which would be created in an "empty" land. Environmentalism, pastoral and agrarian myths, physiocratic beliefs, and elements now associated with the "frontier" thesis — democracy, egalitarianism, individualism, co-operation, virility, opportunity, innovation — were aspects of the new society in popular estimation. The necessary accompaniment in the two generations prior to the Great War was a firm belief in progress. Nowhere was that central tenet of the nineteenth century gospel to mean more. Faith in western development was part of the philosophy of Confederation, and the West itself was founded upon local expectations of growth, prosperity and power.

With a clean slate to receive their designs, and the comforting doctrine of progress to maintain their optimism, westerners set out to establish a uniform society upon not one but several paths. They ignored the ideal of a natural spontaneous world, but instead welcomed their heritage of law, religion and government; Mounted Police, Protestant churches, legislative assemblies, and national schools soon garrisoned their outpost of civilization. Imperialists like Laurie emphasized the British Ontario cast of this ideal while North Americans like John W. Dafoe assumed the melting pot would produce a western Canadian version of the United States. J.S. Woodsworth, working to ameliorate social conditions, was content to wait for the maturing of a new "national type." Whatever their hopes, these men understood that the West was leading Canada toward a new and greater nationality.

The future of the new society, and the assumptions of its spokesmen, were not without flaw. H.F. Gadsby, journalist with the superior magazine, *Saturday Night,* reminded rural-dwellers of their weaknesses in 1918 in a commentary of a farmer's march to Ottawa:

> And the morning and the afternoon were the second day, and the Sons of the Soil met together in a painted chamber to chide King Borden for that he did not let them stay at home to charge ninety cents a pound for turkey at Christmas. . . .
> And there were scribes present with long pencils and a nose for news.
> And one scribe said to another: "An odor prevaileth."
> And the other answered: "Why not? They are five thousand strong."
> And still another scribe said: "It is the sulphide mill." But it was not the sulphide mill.
> And another said: "It is the odor of sanctity." But it was not Leader Rowell, albeit he was with King Borden and sat on the high seats with him.
> And another said: "It is the livery stable," which was nearer the mark. But it was not the livery stable.
> And another scribe said: "It is the *esprit de corps.*"
> And it was a true word.[7]

Gadsby's *hauteur* reflected the threat to the western vision which lay in an amalgam of images known variously as urban, business and modern. The age-old conflict between city-slicker and country bumpkin, widespread ignorance of the mysteries of commerce and finance, distrust of the political establishment where it seemed to be allied with other interests, and fear of modern ways, all created a challenge to the ideal which was labelled "eastern" and thus incorporated into the western myth by virtue of its contrast.

An important product of the new outlook was the segregation of the country into a West and, in those less complex times, an East. Discussions of this national dichotomy in the first two decades of the century demonstrated the power of the myth to define a community's attributes and to distinguish them from other ways of life.

At least as important in the definition of a community were regional interests, chiefly economic and political, which collectively approached the status of a western ideology. Though their goals might differ, many groups assumed the uniqueness of their viewpoint, the regional origin of their grievance or solution, and the desirability of converting the nation to the western style. The usual political battles of a federal system, particularly those related to provincial rights and better terms and the public lands question, contributed to the western bias, of course, but so too did the inevitable issue of French-Canadian and Roman Catholic influence in the country. Even more pertinent were the economic and administrative arrangements of the National Policy which dealt with the very lifeblood of western citizens and seemed to favour the central provinces at the expense of the rags and tatters of Confederation. Dissatisfaction with policies on homestead lands and natural resources, railroads and communications, tariffs and grain marketing, was compounded by western failure to secure autonomous

secondary enterprise, thus relegating the area to allegedly truncated economic and social development. Because these political and economic interests were often defined simply as western, they assisted at the redefinition of the nation around the turn of the century.

First fruit of the western agitation was a renewed emphasis upon the regional nature of Canada which, in some minds, became almost a doctrine of government. According to J.W. Dafoe, for example, sections had varying powers in the determination of federal policies: on matters of national concern, each section would exercise only a modifying influence, he agreed, but on questions of local concern, (like the Hudson Bay railroad), the section would be able to determine policy. When this doctrine of sectional powers proved unsatisfactory for western purposes, a conclusion reached in the second decade of the century, new political solutions were examined. By that time, however, it was conventional wisdom in the West, if not in the nation. Economic and political interests, in this perspective, were determined or defined by regional location; policy change was the result of regional conflict and compromise. Though obviously not as impressive, regionalism was, like Marxism, an ideology which explained social conflict and historical change.

Myth and interest were the constituents of western regional consciousness. They worked together and on different planes to create a sense of community distinctiveness. By influencing men's perception of themselves and their society, the consciousness in turn influenced the course of Canadian history. A measure of its nature and impact can be taken by a study of national institutions like the Trades and Labour Congress, the Methodist Church, and the two-party political system.

Western interests had become apparent in the labour movement as early as 1900 and had actually precipitated serious conflict in the first decade of the century. In the optimistic years of economic growth, however, western union leaders generally maintained their hopes of accommodation with their eastern counterparts. The war proved too much for this alliance, however, and resulted in serious divisions over registration and conscription in 1916-17 and industrial organization and direct action in 1918-19. The result was widespread western secession from the Trades and Labour Congress and the formation of the One Big Union. Two factors seem significant to the historian of the regional community: the rhetoric of the union spokesmen smacked of the western myth as promulgated by leaders in other segments of western society, and the principle of regional secession was used by the radical strategists to begin the transformation of North America. The goal of

men like Ivens and Pritchard and Russell was clearly to change the world — and their tactic was to appeal to the regional community with regional rhetoric. Of course, their programme and critique was much more than western, but regional consciousness was a fundamental element in its conception and implementation.

Members of the Methodist Church were made aware of western needs and possibilities during the settlement of Manitoba, and learned the difficulties of maintaining a national association in the first decade of the century. Thus, the union of 1884 was prompted in part by the prospect and problems of western expansion; the General Conferences of 1902, 1906 and 1910 dealt at some length with western pressure for greater administrative autonomy and for a more responsive church publication. Meeting the spiritual needs of a growing English-Canadian community and educating European immigrants in Canadian ways prompted many expressions of dissatisfaction in the West and reinforced the drive for a United Church. Though the social gospel movement had its roots in national and international phenomena, its Canadian expression also acknowledged a debt to the West, as statements by clergymen in farm and labour movements and the Progressive party demonstrated. The transformation of the Methodist church in the years before 1925 was partly the result of western problems, western initiatives and western consciousness.

The most dramatic example of the impact of regional consciousness lay in the party system. Federal parties had entered provincial politics in Manitoba during the 1880's and had moved into the Territories just prior to the creation of Saskatchewan and Alberta in 1905. As a result, the competitive two-party system was functioning more or less smoothly in both federal and provincial spheres on the prairies until the formation of Union government in 1917. The subsequent Progressive victories were products of many forces, of course, but one important facet of the movement was the attempt to carry a regional outlook into the national society. The leaders of the Progressives were very conscious of the western origins of their party and emphasized its novelty and purity in contrast to the Liberals and Conservatives. They subscribed to the usual distinctions between East and West in Canada, associated themselves with the virtues of the agrarian way of life, and moved to build a national reform movement on the basis of their western heritage. The perspective and platform of the Manitoban wing of the party was drawn in large measure from the myth and interests which had been pressed by western spokesmen for decades. Though Crerar, Dafoe and the *Grain Growers' Guide* represented only one of several varieties of Progressivism, they were in the ascendancy in the immediate post-

war years. In these men and their viewpoint lay the national appeal and ultimate weakness of the party. For them, as Dafoe said in 1925, "The Progressives represented a western outlook, which has not vanished by any means. If it does not present itself through the media of the Progressives it will appear in some other form. That point should not be lost sight of."[8]

The region remains, in this perspective, mid-way between the local or provincial community and the nation. By concentrating on expressions of regional consciousness, such a study exaggerates divisions within the country and under-estimates the power of the national ideal. Moreover, by focusing on the West as a unit, these comments conceal the great variation of attitude and conditions within the area. And by describing the nature and influence of regional sentiment, they look only obliquely at the question of why this sentiment developed. However, the result is not merely an opinion study: histories of the institutions provide concrete examples in which to examine regional consciousness as rhetoric, as source of friction, and as nostrum for or explanation of change. The concept of regional consciousness is one means of presenting the role of the West in the Canadian experience.

NOTES

[1] W.N. Sage, "Geographical and Cultural Aspects of the Five Canadas," Canadian Historical Association, *Report*, 1937, p. 33.

[2] Ben Halpern, " 'Myth' and 'Ideology' in Modern Usage," *History and Theory, I* (1961).

[3] *Saskatchewan Herald*, October 6, 1879.

[4] Allan R. Turner (ed.), "The Letters of P.G. Laurie," *Saskatchewan History, XIV* (1961), pp. 48, 51.

[5] *Saskatchewan Herald*, July 20, 1885.

[5] *Ibid.*, May 17, 1886.

[7] H.F. Gadsby, "The Sons of the Soil," *Saturday Night* June 1, 1918, p. 4.

[8] *Manitoba Free Press*, October 30, 1925, p. 15.